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GIGI THIBODEAU AND TODD AVERY

Lytton Strachey's "The Decline and Fall of Little Red Riding Hood"

Introduction

Like his friend Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey (1880–1932) was "born into a very communicative, literate, letter writing, visiting, articulate, late nineteenth century world" (Woolf 73). Together with Woolf and her husband, Leonard, Strachey was a core member of the Bloomsbury Group, an influential circle of friends that began to coalesce at Cambridge University in the first years of the twentieth century and that comprised such artists, writers, and intellectuals as Clive and Vanessa Bell, E. M. Forster, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant, and John Maynard Keynes. In the context of English literature, he is equally well known as an innovative biographer and historian, the iconoclastic author of Eminent Victorians *(1918),* Queen Victoria *(1921), and* Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History *(1928). As a highly literate member of England's late-Victorian intellectual aristocracy and a product of the age's nursery culture, Strachey surely knew the works of the Grimms, Hans Christian Andersen, and Charles Perrault, as well as Andrew Lang's fairy books, among other literary fairy tales; as a budding aesthete at the fin de siècle, he also likely read Oscar Wilde's fairy tales. His mother, Lady Jane Strachey, was passionately literary and invested in the promotion of children's literature, editing a collection of Edward Lear's* Complete Nonsense Book *in 1912. Strachey himself is not known to have harbored any interest*

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in the fairy-tale tradition; his published works contain no references to it, and unlike Woolf, who employed the Grimms' tale "The Fisherman and His Wife" to poignant effect in her novel To the Lighthouse, *Strachey never drew upon this tradition for narrative, rhetorical, or thematic purposes. To all intents and purposes, Lytton Strachey and fairy tales seem to have inhabited different universes.*

An unpublished manuscript in the Strachey Papers at the British Library, however, helps to illuminate not exactly Strachey's relation to fairy tales as such, but the role that his engagement with one of them played in his early intellectual development as a theorist of the writing of history. This manuscript reveals also, by extension, the previously unacknowledged place of fairy tales in the development of modernist historiography—theories about the writing of history articulated during the early twentieth century. Strachey wrote "The Decline and Fall of Little Red Riding Hood" in 1897, shortly after he had begun reading Edward Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire *for the first time. His version of the Red Riding Hood story represents, as his biographer Michael Holroyd writes, "Lytton's most considerable piece of writing up to the age of seventeen." With a noticeable condescension toward the fairy-tale genre, Holroyd also claims that in this story Strachey "concocted an amusing parody of Gibbon's balanced Corinthian rhetoric, which is nicely overweighted by the triviality of the fairy story to which it is applied" (72). Indeed, "The Decline and Fall of Little Red Riding Hood" retells the tale in a Gibbonian style. And the source material is surely not quite so inconsequential as Holroyd claims. But given that Strachey chose this source text as the inspiration for his "most considerable piece of writing" before he went up to Cambridge University, where in the company of such historians as J. B. Bury and G. M. Trevelyan he began in earnest to forge his historiographical ideas, several questions arise. What is significant about Strachey's version of the Red Riding Hood tale beyond the interest it possesses as a piece of juvenilia by a talented and skillfully imitative young writer who twenty years later would provocatively redefine the art of biography? Why is this unpublished version of Little Red Riding Hood by a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old boy, barely out of childhood himself, worth more than a passing glance? What exactly does it tell us about Strachey's early development as a historian? And why is it in fact a compelling addition to the Red Riding Hood corpus in particular and a notable contribution to fin de siècle developments in the fairy tale in general?*

These questions point to issues too large to treat adequately here; they are meant to be suggestive of further exploration. Nevertheless, several specific aspects of this retelling of the Little Red Riding Hood tale are worth mentioning. The echoes of Gibbon, for example, in the title and the opening phrase chronologically position the narrative (though not the events it tells) as modern, long past "the long distant age of fable" and implicitly in or after the age of reason. The several phrases are significant, too, in which Strachey figures the narrative not as a fable, tale, or story, but explicitly as history: "History does not reveal the details of the interview," and "it is difficult in-

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deed for the pen of the historian to do justice" to "that celebrated conversation" between Red Riding Hood and the wolf. Beginning in the late 1890s, Strachey was a devotee of Gibbon; he then studied history at Cambridge University, and remained so. Late in his life, in a miniature portrait of Gibbon, Strachey celebrated his supreme artistry in history as a sally in his continuing challenge to the increasing dominance of the "scientific" historiography that had emerged with positivism in the late nineteenth century and gained influence in the following decades.

The stylistic imitation of Gibbon also suggests Strachey's affinity with his religious skepticism. At first glance the story as Strachey tells it may be read as a straightforward morality tale in support of conventional Christian morality: Red Riding Hood's failure to seek "divine assistance" upon encountering the old, deceitful wolf leads to her decline and fall. But a different tendency is noticeable. The influence of Gibbon bolsters Strachey's emergent atheism, as well as his characteristically ironic attitude, so that the story's attribution of Red Riding Hood's fate to her willful "ignoring [of] the holy and unreasoning precepts of Christianity" should be read not only as a parody of the implicit Christian moralism of the Grimms' version, where the huntsman-savior calls the wolf "you old sinner," but also as an ironic critique of conventional Christian morality as such. From the beginning, Strachey's bombastic, self-conscious camp style undercuts the ostensible seriousness of the moral attitude that would ascribe Red Riding Hood's "dissolution" to her failure to "pour . . . forth her soul in a humble prayer for help to the mighty Ruler of all human destinies."

Every retelling of a canonical fairy tale understands itself as a retelling. Strachey draws from both Perrault and the Grimms: he incorporates the Grimms' Christian themes but then uses Perrault's condensed narrative structure to eliminate the possibility of Christian redemption. As in Perrault's version, there is no huntsman, no "good" male figure to counter the savage darkness of the wolf. In his return to Perrault, Strachey eliminates the Christian moralism with which the Grimms had augmented and extended Perrault's tale. Moreover, by calling attention both to himself—or to the narrator—as a historian and to the tale as history, Strachey constructs a metanarrative that anticipates—or, as he might have put it, forestalls—so many late twentieth-century metafictional treatments of the tale, by Roald Dahl and others. As a metanarrative in history, Strachey's version of the tale also adumbrates his fundamental belief in history as an artistic endeavor more than a scientific one and may be read as an articulation of the historiographical principle that history is a quasi-fictional art—not an effort to tell the truth as it actually happened, or to reveal the facts about the past, but rather to tell a story that through its artistry reveals fundamental truths indirectly. In this, too, Strachey's story anticipates much poststructuralist and postmodern historiographical discourse; he possesses a closer affinity with historians who see history as the stories we tell about the past than to those who preserve the belief that history can be the unmediated record of what actually happened in the past.

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Charles Richard Sanders describes Strachey's aesthetic susceptibility in a rhapsodic passage that, mutatis mutandis, may well be read as a gloss on Strachey's version of the Red Riding Hood tale. "The earth," Sanders writes, "was his abode; on it he responded with delight when he encountered the beauty of nature and art, when he chose his path and freely wandered through a vast forest of facts and ideas, and when day by day he beheld the incessant drama of ordinary mortals playing out their little roles—delectable human beings, delectable in their admirable characteristics and delectable in their foolishness" (72). In his most fully developed piece of youthful writing, Strachey portrays a little girl who, wandering in a forest, is delectably foolish and, well, quite simply delectable. He uses the occasion of this traditional drama to begin articulating an approach to life-writing and to historiography that would exercise a strong influence on the practice of these genres over the course of the twentieth-century.

The Decline and Fall of Little Red Riding Hood

In the long distant age of fable there dwelt, happy and secure, a woodman and his family. The house which he inhabited was built on the outskirts of a great forest, and was well appointed though small and unpretentious. His wife was an excellent woman of good heart and of meager capacity. His mother-in-law, harmless, but not unforgotten [*sic*], dragged out her old age on the remote side of the forest. His only daughter, whose vivacity seemed to illumine her surroundings, and whose charm was felt by all with equal intensity, had just entered on her thirteenth year; and it is the purpose of this work to describe, with as much exactitude as possible, those circumstances which had so direct a bearing on her life, and which were ultimately the cause of her dissolution.

The mother devoted herself principally to cheese making: the woodman himself spent his time according to the customs of his class, in felling the trees which had fallen into decay, in preserving the game to the best of his ability, and in destroying with the utmost vigour the wild animals of the forest. The child had no settled task to perform, no daily duty to neglect; her scarlet cloak, no less from the beauty of the material than the brilliance of the colouring, was the cause of envy and admiration alike, and had procured for her the remarkable agnomen of Little Red Riding Hood. The day on which our narrative commences was an auspicious one for the small family; the old lady, who had lived for so many years on the other side of the forest, had, by a signal act of senility, reached her eightieth birthday. Little Red Riding Hood wished to be the first to salute her grandmother.

Before she made her departure she was given a basket containing eggs, butter, and cheese to present to her aged relative. Her father reminded her of the messages and congratulations that it was proper to give on such an occasion.

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Throwing her cloak about her shoulders, she stepped out of the cottage: but her mother had yet to give a last and most salutary piece of advice. She pointed out to the child with all the earnestness of maternal solicitude at her command the perils of the wood, and the dangers of the walk; she implored her neither to deviate from the beaten track, nor to linger on the way; above all she warned her daughter against the wild beasts of the forest; and bade her beware of the fierce savagery of the lion, the fatal embraces of the bear, and the crafty malignity of the wolf.

Happily for her own peace of mind, Little Red Riding Hood paid no immediate attention to the injunctions of her father, or the fears of her mother. She walked on with intrepid footsteps toward the centre of the forest; but she soon perceived, at a little distance from the path, some flowers of rare beauty and peculiar conformation. Her desire to pluck them was only equaled by the difficulty of reaching them. A large blackberry bush seemed effectively to prevent her approach. She had almost given up the attempt in despair when help came from an unexpected quarter.

It has already been indicated that Red Riding Hood had as yet not given a thought to the beasts of the forest, and there can be no doubt that at that moment she was not expecting an interview with one. Her surprise may therefore be judged when on looking round she beheld the crafty eye, the sinister jowl, and the gaunt form of a wolf aged alike in years and in deceit.

Her first deed should doubtless have been to have poured forth her soul in a humble prayer for help to the mighty Ruler of all human destinies. If she had followed this course of action, who will hesitate to affirm that her sanctity would have been rewarded by some signal manifestation of the divine assistance? Unfortunately this history is designed to illustrate not only the admirable actions but the deplorable crimes of mankind, and Little Red Riding Hood paved the way for her early doom by entirely ignoring the holy and unreasoning precepts of Christianity; she gave way to that natural and pernicious instinct of curiosity which has conferred so many inestimable benefits on the human race; and she asked, little knowing that she was violating the most sacred ordinances of the Creator, the most express injunction of the Church, "Who are you?"

Any doubts that she might have entertained were dispelled by the gentle answer of her companion. His suave tones and insinuating demeanour reassured and flattered his victim. He offered her the flowers with a punctilious deference almost amounting to a chivalrous politeness. The pair resumed their walk amidst confidence on the one hand, and flattery on the other. It was not long before the wolf had ascertained the precise nature of the child's mission, and he at once proposed that a plan should be put into execution as harmless in appearance as it was diabolical in reality.

The old lady's residence was but a short distance away; he declared that by taking a road which he pointed out, the house could be reached with increased

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celerity. He suggested that a race would no doubt amuse little Missy, and speed the time very agreeably; that he, being the swiftest, would take the longest road, while his fair companion with more graceful steps proceeded straight to the cottage.

Little Red Riding Hood, with a credulous simplicity perhaps worthy of a better cause, agreed to the proposal and was soon buried in the depths of the forest. The wolf, on the other hand, saw the success of his plan with the approving eye of a skilful strategist; he started off along the path, the violence of his rapacity continually increasing the swiftness of his foot; until at last, having traversed twice as quickly as Red Riding Hood a road twice as short as that which she had taken, he arrived in triumph at the house of the redoubtable though comatose octogenarian. History does not reveal the details of the interview. It can only be gathered that it was a short and stormy one. It is known for certain, however, that the wolf attained at the same moment a victory and a meal, and that when Little Red Riding Hood entered her grandmother's abode, the arch deceiver, occupying the bed, and arrayed in the nightgown, of his unfortunate victim, was prepared to receive the child with a smile of outward welcome and of inward derision.

The latter approached the bed of her supposed relative. She gave her the butter, the cheese, and the eggs. The messages were delivered in the manner which her father had advised and her reverence exacted. Her grandmother thanked her in terms both gruff and to the point. On being asked the reason of her deep voice she replied that she was afflicted with a throat so sore that speech was almost impossible. And then began that celebrated conversation which has been handed down from age to age with such peculiar care, and to which it is difficult indeed for the pen of the historian to do justice even if it is imbued with the highest talent and the most gorgeous imagination.

It is reported by unimpeachable authority that the child, little suspecting her imminent peril, made a series of ejaculations which diverted for a moment her approaching doom. "Grandmama," she said as she approached the fatal bed, "what big eyes you have!" The wolf, willing to delay the abominable deed in order to prolong the delicious expectation, replied, "Yes; the better to see with, my dear." "Grandmama," said the persistent child, "what large ears you have!" "No doubt," replied the other with cynical grin distorting his gaunt features, "the better to hear with, my child." "But Grandmama," said Little Red Riding Hood, gazing with consternation on the glistening fangs of her interlocutor, "what big teeth you have!" "The better," answered the wolf, seeing the culmination of his plan coincide with the humour of the situation, "the better to eat you, my dear!" Suiting the action to the word, he leapt out of bed, and with incredible savageness threw himself upon his victim. Then he divested himself of his borrowed raiment and slipped quietly out of the cottage. The

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woodman arrived on the scene a few hours later: he discovered with dismay that his mother-in-law and his child had disappeared, and he could find no clue, as he gazed on the dismantled furniture, of the whereabouts of his ill-fated daughter.

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